

THE IMPACT OF BAL TASCHIT IN THE WRITINGS OF ANNE FRANK, PRIMO LEVI,  
AND ELIE WIESEL

by

Matthew Glenn Childres

April, 2013

Director of Thesis/Dissertation: Richard Taylor

Major Department: English

This thesis focuses on how the Jewish tradition of Bal Taschit influenced the behavior and thoughts of prisoners during the Holocaust. The interaction with nature in Holocaust works indicates an adherence to this tradition and that the writers were able to use this tradition to make a statement of how the destruction of the Holocaust was offset by preservation and admiration of nature.

The interaction between prisoners and their natural environment and the effects of those interactions is explored through the works of Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi, and Anne Frank. These are the most prominent and well known Holocaust survivor authors.

Many scholars have studied the effects of imprisonment and the Holocaust, but little has been said about Jewish environmental thought.



THE IMPACT OF BAL TASCHIT IN THE WRITINGS OF ANNE FRANK, PRIMO LEVI,  
AND ELIE WIESEL

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Department of English  
East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
MA in English

by

Matthew Glenn Childres

April, 2013

© Matthew Glenn Childres, 2013

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
PREFATORY .....	i
INTRODUCTION: JEWISH ECOLOGY .....	1
CHAPTER 1: VIEW FROM OUTSIDE THE ANNEX .....	9
CHAPTER 2: THE NATURE OF LEVI .....	15
CHAPTER 3: WIESEL'S WAR ON DESTRUCTION .....	28
CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION .....	41
WORKS CITED .....	43

## INTRODUCTION: JEWISH ECOLOGY

In an article for the Jewish journal *Judaism and Human Rights*, Samson Raphael Hirsch describes what happens when the Jewish environmental law is disobeyed. Speaking as if he were God he gives stern warning about the importance of Nature and obeying the laws of God: “If you destroy, if you ruin—at that moment you are not a man, you are an animal, and have no right to the things around you. I lent them to you for wise use only; never forget that I lent them to you. As soon as you use them unwisely, be it the greatest or smallest, you commit treachery against My world, you commit murder and robbery against My property, you sin against Me!” (Hirsch 259). Hirsch dwells on the personal relationship between mankind and God, and the stewardship of the Earth that is placed on mankind. The guilt and responsibility he places on those who transgress these laws is aimed at the Third Reich. It is within that nation that one of the greatest crimes of humanity occurred. It was a crime against natural laws, and a crime against God. With this comment, Hirsch divides the line more distinctly between those that follow God’s law (Jews) and those that do not (non-Jews).

Nature is fundamental to theology and to our inner selves. As Cheryl Glotfelty states: “the first Law of Ecology is . . . Everything is connected to everything else” (Glotfelty 108). Not only is nature connected to theology, but it is also connected to literature. Glotfelty noted this by saying: “In literature, all energy comes from the creative imagination” (Glotfelty 109). This creative imagination is in part formed from our experiences with the natural world, our interactions with nature. The fundamental Jewish law on nature is *Bal Taschit*. This law says to preserve nature and not to destroy. It is within obedience to this law that one can find nurture and healing, peace and reassurance. By preserving and protecting nature, we can be assured of our own preservation and protection. Although only a few verses in the Old Testament and

allusions in the Talmud make up this law, its effects are far reaching and cover many different aspects. For instance, the law covers the number of trees to be cut down during war, as well as property rights and usage.

The natural world is an element of the teachings in all religions. Throughout time, writers have tried to grasp their religious beliefs in terms of nature and in analogy to the natural world. For Jewish writers, specifically those writing about the Holocaust, nature and self-preservation go hand in hand. For within this Jewish law is a code of conduct about nature. Eilon Schwartz gives insight to this code by saying, “The many interpretations offered in the literature on the human responsibility to the natural world thus cited leaves much latitude for the application of the concept of bal Taschit in Jewish law” (Schwartz 365). Schwartz denotes Bal Taschit as an over-arching law that has many applications. It can also be ascertained that this law has many interpretations and meanings particular to certain Holocaust writers. Therefore, it is imperative that a diverse group of Holocaust writers be examined to show the similarities and over-arching themes of this law. As evident in later writings, this code allowed many Jews a psychological or spiritual escape from the horrors around them.

Cheryl Glotfelty provides some background on Jewish study of natural theology and states: “The religious study of nature for the better understanding of God was known as natural theology”(Glotfelty 11). This natural theology is a link between man and nature. Adhering to the tenets of the law helps the believers and strengthens their relationship with God, nature, and themselves. She goes on to explain that, “Nature, glorious, unapproachable, inimitable...raises one’s thought reverently upwards to her Creator and ours” (Glotfelty 328). Glotfelty is saying that nature has links with God. Jews living during the Holocaust were seeking explanations from God for why horrifying events were happening. Much of the *Diary of Anne Frank* and Primo

Levi's works are devoted to moral and ethical questions pertaining to the Holocaust and God's role. Turning to nature would be a natural and theological recourse for them as evidenced in their writings and in writings from other Holocaust victims. It also would be a theme for Holocaust writers to explore and use to explain the mood and emotions of victims. The inclusion of natural themes and instances within their works allowed them to express those situations and feelings in ways that future generations would be able to relate. It also strengthened the idea that humanity, nature, and God are connected through this law of "do not destroy." This connection served as a source of strength for those living through the Holocaust. It restored some sense of normalcy and peace, and victims saw the preservation of nature as a preservation of self. This symbiotic relationship between nature and mankind was important to the emotional health of Holocaust victims and their protectors.

The Holocaust, or extermination of Jews and other so-called undesirables, that took place in occupied Europe before and during World War II has had far-reaching effects on literature in the twentieth century. Much has been written about the Holocaust in terms of suffering and destruction, even hope and renewal. However, scholars have downplayed the role of nature in the Holocaust. Writers tend to focus on the destruction of human lives and the depravity and sadism of the Nazi state. Yet the connection between that destruction and nature needs more exploration. By applying the tenets and meaning of Bal Taschit, one can grasp a greater insight into what the Holocaust meant for those who experienced it.

According to Eilon Schwartz, the Jewish law of Bal Taschit is an ancient Jewish law on nature that is translated as "do not destroy". It is my theory that this element of Jewish law, found within Holocaust literature, had an effect on the minds and memories of Holocaust writers and their peers. Bal Taschit is a collection of scripture found in the Old Testament (Torah) and



the rabbinical teachings within the Jewish Talmud. It originally served as a small conservation law dealing with the destruction of fruit trees and what was ethical as far as tree-cutting during wartime. However, the law has further encompassed the idea that destruction of anything within nature or anything that could have harmful affects for humankind needs avoidance. If there is an antithesis to Nazi ideology, it would best be represented by the law of Bal Taschit.

Humans are not fruit trees, yet murder during the Nazi occupation does draw an interesting parallel. Bal Taschit further defined all that was in opposition to the Fascist way of life: “The rabbis. . . did not understand *bal Taschit* as a precept solely concerned with fruit trees, but rather as a far-reaching principle that defines our responsibilities and obligations to the created world” (Schwartz 361). Such responsibilities to nature during wartime seem irrelevant; however, many non-Jews managed to combine their obligations for saving nature by saving their fellow Holocaust victims. Michel Foucault reminded readers that this relationship with nature should come naturally. Foucault furthered this idea by saying: “We should not need to wait for bureaucracy or concentration camps to recognize the existence of such relations” (Foucault 17). By bringing this law to light, and by showing the relationship of nature to Jewish religion, Holocaust writers have furthered not only the notion of “never again” for genocide, but also “never again” for natural destruction.

According to the Coalition on Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL), the purpose of Bal Taschit is more than a law dealing with nature:

Teach us to love that which is good and worthwhile and to cling to it, so that good becomes a part of us and we will avoid all that is evil and destructive. This is the way of the righteous and those who improve society, who love peace and rejoice in the good in people and bring them close to Torah: that nothing, not even a grain

of mustard, should be lost to the world, that they should regret any loss or destruction that they see, and if possible they will prevent any destruction that they can. Not so are the wicked, who are like demons, who rejoice in destruction of the world, and they are destroying themselves (COEJL 1).

What is interesting in the Coalition's definition is the mention of all that is evil and destructive. This statement does not differentiate between humans or trees, but says that nothing should be lost to the world.

Bal Taschit is a Biblical law, derived from certain scriptures and expounded upon by Judaic scholars and clergy. Since the advent of the industrial revolution and more environmental awareness, Bal Taschit has risen out of obscurity. Eilon Schwartz related that the principle itself came from nothing other than behavior during war: "The principle of Bal Taschit originated in the attempt to explicate one specific biblical passage from Deuteronomy, which describes what constitutes proper behavior during time of war" (Schwartz 356). The passage Schwartz is referring to is Deuteronomy 20:19-20. How appropriate that this law should be connected to one of the most destructive epochs in modern history, the Holocaust. The constitution of this mitzvah shows that there was engrained in all believing Jews the notion that destruction was their enemy, and that deliverance (whether emotional or physical) could be derived from an awareness of nature. According to the Coalition on Environment and Jewish Life: "By observing the mitzvah of *bal Taschit*, we restore our harmony not only with the world around us, but with the Divine Will, which we place ahead of our own" (COEJL 1). Restoring harmony and balance was an obvious goal of Jews suffering through the Holocaust but also the sense of selflessness is inborn in Jews. Through observation of this law as evidenced in their writings, Holocaust victims were able to make attempts at peace and attempts to change what was going on around them and

provide help for fellow sufferers. Schwartz goes on to paraphrase Maimonides' explanation of Bal Taschit: "Maimonides expands Bal Taschit to include the destruction before its time of anything, natural or artificial. The world of creation includes the creation of the natural world and the world which humans have created from God's creation. There should be no needless destruction of any of the creation" (Schwartz 363). He further stated that "Not only trees, but whoever breaks vessels, tears clothing, wrecks that which is built up, stops fountains, or wastes food in a destructive manner, transgresses the commandment" (Nir 340). The destruction inflicted by the Nazis on Jews was needless. With propaganda and scapegoating, millions were brainwashed into implementing the "final solution" to the Jewish question.

How do the environment and Jewish law relate to literature then? According to Cheryl Glotfelty in her work *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, Ecocriticism is the "study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xviii) and is critical to understanding that literature and the environment do interact. This interaction allows us to see how theological ideas and laws can enable characters or persons within a story or in real life to relate to their physical surroundings in an emotional way. The premise is that "human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (Glotfelty xix). All cultures make connections to nature, and that is what links one culture to another. What better way to connect an understanding of the Holocaust from a survivor's point of view to that of someone without such an experience. Scott Slovic noted that "the writer who goes 'outside' in order to help himself and his audience understand both the exotic and the familiar forces his readers to draw upon their capacity for metaphor, to associate their own landscapes with the writer's, their language and conceptual patterns with those of the story" (Glotfelty 366). Slovic speaks of an association with landscape and co-dependence on the environment. As this study

will argue, Holocaust writers often used nature as a metaphor to further their themes of hope within suffering

Glotfelty wrote: “The identity of the individual as a part of the group and the greater whole is strengthened, and the terror of facing the world alone is extinguished” (Glotfelty 274). This demonstrates the interdependence between nature and man, that one can strengthen nature by nurturing and protecting, and nature can protect man by providing a greater identity and sense of group. If man can relate and sympathize with the environment, hope and endurance is increased. This quote demonstrates that as the environment is dependent on us to protect it, we too are dependent on the environment for identity and courage, not just physical sustenance and life itself. This idea of interdependence is captured in Bal Taschit.

Jewish ecology is a frontier that needs further research and study. However, the basic principle of Bal Taschit should be a starting point for researchers of Holocaust literature because the principle is linked with the thoughts and persuasions of victims during that time period. The starting point for Bal Taschit in Holocaust literature would be to explore the works of prolific Holocaust writers. The authors I chose for this thesis are Anne Frank, Elie Wiesel, and Primo Levi. I chose these three authors because of their status as authors and universal renown. They also broke away from one type of Holocaust experience. There was more than just concentration camp life; there was life in a ghetto and life in a secret annex. These many different arenas further the idea of an overarching idea of Bal Taschit. I started with Anne Frank because of her well-known status and the level of her story. There was no overt violence or bloodshed like in the other authors’ works; it was a simple story of survival. I thought Levi balanced out as a middle chapter because of his middle of the road type of setup. He was educated, but not yet in his career; he was still young and was still questioning his own beliefs. Yet his ordeals may have

been even more severe than Frank's. I saved Wiesel for the last chapter because he goes into depth the most with religious thought and philosophy. Primo Levi was a chemist from Italy, while Elie Wiesel was a young man from Romania who had extensive religious teaching. Anne Frank was a young girl from Holland who simply kept a diary of her life. Through this diverse group, young and old, learned and unlearned, male and female, the thread of Bal Taschit can be seen in their allusions to nature and spiritual matters. Although each writer's experience differed, each somehow used Bal Taschit to give hope for survival and help their faith in God. This law of Bal Taschit, even if implicitly stated within Holocaust literature, helped the Jews in their struggle to survive.

## CHAPTER 1: VIEW OF THE OUTSIDE FROM THE ANNEX

The concentration camp life in the testimonies of Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi, and other victims of the Final Solution exposed an unimaginable horror. Concentration camp victims had experiences that many other Holocaust survivors, such as Anne Frank, were not able to write about. Yet some commonalities exist between the two groups of people, those in hiding and those in concentration camps. By comparing the different experiences, the reader can discern a theme of *Bal Taschit* and preservation is seen.

Tucked away in a warehouse on a busy street in Holland during World War II, a Jewish family bonded together and tried to retain hope for the future. This is the basis of Anne Frank's story. The secret annex is, of course, Anne Frank's name for the hiding place in her father's warehouse. Over the course of two years, she documented life within the confinements of the tiny attic. Her descriptions in her journal are vague concerning nature, yet many passages indicate not only her longing for normalcy, but also how nature brought about a sense of peace and a sense of hope for the future. As the researcher Feldhay noted: "The Secret Annexe . . . retained a semblance of normalcy which helped to insist on continuing faith in humanism" (Brenner 105). Her diary is unique in that it also shows that the law has application for all ages. As a young teenage diarist, Anne demonstrates that "do not destroy" is not merely an adult issue.

Anne Frank's life in the secret annex was still and sterile. Denied necessities, she coped with the loss of resources. She writes: "I'm sitting cozily in the main office, looking outside through a slit in the curtain . . . it is dusk but still just light enough to write to you" (Frank 60). Denied artificial light and other amenities, Anne and her family became more reliant on natural resources. Although much of the story revolves around the workings within the "secret annex," Anne's thoughts and dreams tie in with her religion and the outside world. She often dreams of

life outside the walls of the annex, and many of her entries speculate as to what life was like before the war, and what it may be like afterwards. Her longing for the outside was evident throughout as were little things such as fresh air, which bring her back to a happier time. Her routine for reviving herself shows a connection with nature. She would "...go to the window, take down the blackout, sniff at the crack of the window until I feel a bit of fresh air, and I'm awake" (Frank 102). This revival of the senses coincides with the principles of Bal Taschit. Frank uses nature in order to preserve and protect. Her perhaps unknowing adherence to this principle in Bal Taschit demonstrates the power of nature in helping the oppressed. The law becomes a releasing agent, something that reminds humanity of who it is. It overshadows the evil of confinement and destruction.

Yet within Anne Frank's work, there is a melancholy and sadness in the loss of her natural world. She laments about the atmosphere: "The atmosphere is so oppressive, and sleepy and heavy as lead...[You] don't hear a single bird singing outside, and a deadly close silence hangs everywhere, catching hold of me as if it will drag me down deep into an underworld" (Frank 113). Unable to make noise herself, she no doubt relates to the silence outside. The natural urge to go and do fails because of the necessity of hiding. She furthers her analogy of the songbird by saying, "I wander from one room to another, downstairs and up again, feeling like a songbird whose wings have been clipped and who is hurling himself in utter darkness against the bars of his cage" (Frank 113). This macabre comparison shows her longing for the outside world, and she feels cut down and cut off from nature. Finally, she imparts what her innermost thought is, and the reader is drawn into the depth of her despair: "Go outside, laugh and take a breath of fresh air, a voice cries within me, but I don't even feel a response any more" (Frank 113). Beaten down by the monotony and suspense of living in hiding, Frank becomes detached from

the outside world, and more importantly nature. She feels something inside her crying out for nature.

Rachel Feldhay Brenner states that Anne: “becomes increasingly conscious of the impossibility to communicate the tensions, the dangers and the terrifying prospects that she and those with her are facing” (Brenner 109). This impossibility of communication, the songbird effect that Anne described, is a result of her lack of communion with the natural world. Her natural imagery becomes darker, and she uses a foreboding inference that her life and world is to be turned into a wilderness:

I simply can't build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery and death. I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness, I hear the ever approaching thunder which will destroy us too, I can feel the suffering of millions and yet, when I look up into the heavens, I think that it will all come right, that this cruelty too will end, that peace and tranquility will return again. In the meantime, I must uphold my ideals, for perhaps the time will come when I shall be able to carry them out! (Frank 263).

What is interesting about this passage is the use of natural imagery. It shows Frank's connection to and love of nature. She compares the world to the wilderness and mentions thunder. This natural imagery is used to show the destruction and aggression surrounding her life. Yet, when all seems lost, what does she say will happen? She believes that if they look to the heavens, or abide by their theology, cruelty will end and peace and tranquility will return.

How did Anne survive without physical interaction with nature for two years? In her article on Anne Frank's diary entitled “The Utopian Space of a Nightmare: The Diary of Anne Frank,” Barbara Chiarello notes that Anne had to: “create a utopia or perish in despair”



(Chiarello 128). This utopia included a natural world within her enclosed space. Chiarello further explains: “Instead of entering a bigger and better world, these eight hoped to survive by shrinking into almost nothingness” (Chiarello 131). This transformation comes out in the style of Anne’s writing and use of comparisons. Chiarello states: “Anne’s language transforms these rooms into another world parallel to the real world outside” (Chiarello 132). For instance, instead of the gloomy wilderness void of hope, the annex becomes a natural refuge: “I see the eight of us with our ‘Secret Annexe’ as if we were a little piece of blue haven, surrounded by heavy black rain clouds. The round, clearly defined spot where we stand is still safe, but the clouds gather more closely about us and the circle which separates us from the approaching danger closes more and more tightly” (Frank). Her blue haven became a place of refuge where she could analyze the outside world and her own inner perspectives. The rain clouds represented the Nazis, perhaps not as nourishing rain but as a potential flood and gloomy atmosphere. As Brenner put it: “Frank’s ability to see and to respond to suffering reinforces the lesson of victory in defeat that her Diary teaches so poignantly” (Brenner 26). Frank’s need for nature and her recognition of that need is best described in an analogy on Bal Taschit given by Eilon Schwartz. She says, “Human responsibility for the tree is based on human dependence upon the tree” (Schwartz 359). Schwartz shows the codependence humankind has with nature. Humans depend upon trees for physical needs, such as oxygen, but also for spiritual and emotional well-being. Trees need humans to protect them, and humans need trees to protect their hope and faith in the world. Therefore, Anne’s life is interdependent with that of her outside world. When something outside is destroyed, when something is prohibited her, a piece of her own self is destroyed or prohibited.

Anne's use of natural imagery to describe unimaginable events and situations is indicative of her closeness with the natural world. She exclaims that "350 British planes dropped half a million kilos of bombs on IJmuiden and the houses trembled like a wisp of grass in the wind" (Frank). After one particular air raid, she describes Mrs. Van Daan as "shaking like a leaf" (Frank). Although these may seem like ordinary similes and metaphors, with an application of Bal Taschit, the reader knows that she is comparing herself and her family to grass and leaves, items to be destroyed by thoughtless vagabonds. They are the proverbial trees chopped down during time of war.

Some researchers have criticized Anne's faith, saying that she was not fully practicing. This would possibly hinder her awareness of Bal Taschit and adherence to such a law. Yet a passage near the end of her diary speaks otherwise:

Who has inflicted this upon us? Who has made us Jews different from all other people? Who has allowed us to suffer so terribly up till now? It is God that has made us as we are, but it will be God, too, who will raise us up again. If we bear all this suffering and if there are still Jews left, when it is over, then Jews, instead of being doomed, will be held up as an example. Who knows, it might even be our religion from which the world and all peoples learn good, and for that reason and that reason only do we have to suffer now. We can never become just Netherlanders, or just English, or representatives of any country for that matter, we will always remain Jews, but we want to, too (Frank 207).

The key phrase that stands out in this passage is that Frank thinks her religion may teach the world goodness. Through the suffering of the Jews the world will come to realize good. I think that part of this good is the idea of Bal Taschit. That the natural world and environmental issues

came to a greater awareness after the war and in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century could be the good that Frank speaks.

The experiences of Anne Frank give a view of how nature and Bal Taschit help those in hiding cope with isolation and fear. By creating a sense of normalcy and through interactions with the natural world, the Franks were able to buoy their strength. The Bal Taschit principles of non-destruction, preservation, and conservation are evident in their stories, and show their dependence on this law. Though they did not specifically mention Bal Taschit, its tenets are found in the thoughts, words, and trials of these Jews in hiding.

## CHAPTER 2: THE NATURE OF LEVI

In a letter to Primo Levi after the publishing of his work *Survival in Auschwitz*, a German who lived during the same time period of the Holocaust exhorted Levi: “Rejoice for the life that has been given to you again, the peace of your beautiful country. I too know . . . Also Dante and Boccaccio have their place on my shelf” (Levi 177). The Holocaust is as much about life as it is death. When one thinks of the Second World War and the doctrines, events, and people, they are often associated mainly with death. Nevertheless, with Holocaust writers, much emphasis is placed on life. Much of their endurance and survival depended on their viewpoint on life. Levi puts forth the argument that perhaps a devotee of Judaism would have more chance of survival than another man simply because he was pious. A remembrance and harmony with life and nature would increase one’s hope and motivation to live. In a cauldron of death, even an ounce of hope for life could spell the difference. As one survivor put it, “The sun was never beautiful. And when the moon was out, it meant only destruction. We almost forgot what life was all about” (Greene and Kumar 128). This lamentation by Holocaust victims in the work of Joshua Greene and Shiva Kumar denotes the sad affair of their incarceration. However pessimistic this outlook seems, it is still interesting to note their awareness of the natural world and the belief of nature’s capabilities. Yet, how would one regain this loss of nature?

Holocaust scholar Elliot Bartky suggests that the importance of Jewish thought has influenced world history more than is given credit. Bartky suggests that: “Since the Jews and the Jewish tradition are so fundamental to the foundation and development of Western civilization, one might suspect that the Jewish question has a universal or trans-historical meaning worthy of study” (Bartky 346). This universal meaning is evident within the writings of Primo Levi. The works that he created are not meant for literary enjoyment. They are meant as a witness of the

Holocaust and his own thoughts and experiences. His work also shows that his fundamental beliefs, rooted in Jewish doctrine, were instrumental in shaping his philosophies and ultimately saving him from the gas chamber. *Survival in Auschwitz* is a haunting work that follows in the footsteps of Anne Frank and Ellie Wiesel in that it explores the ways in which a man can use his religion and philosophies, with implications and allusions to Bal Taschit, to further his cause of self-preservation. His work with chemistry as well as Holocaust literature has impacted western culture. Levi's knowledge of chemistry sustained his life within the camp. However, his Jewish culture and philosophies have also shown the effects of Bal Taschit and also the Germans' efforts at destroying beliefs and ideals such as Bal Taschit.

Primo Levi was a Holocaust survivor and writer who penned horrific tales of his time in Auschwitz concentration camp. Much of his biography deals with the time leading up to his imprisonment. This time before imprisonment gives a basis and nucleus for understanding his philosophies and perceptions. His biographer, Ian Thompson, has shed more light on his life before and after that war that adds much to the idea that Levi looked to nature as a source of self-preservation. Levi was an amateur hiker and mountain climber. His interest in chemistry and the organic makeup of the natural world shows his ties to nature and even Bal Taschit. I find Levi appropriate for study not only for his view and interaction with the natural world but also for his philosophical and moral insight. As he stated in the preface to his memoir *Survival in Auschwitz*, Levi gave the premise for his writing: "It has not been written in order to formulate new accusations; it should be able, rather, to furnish documentation for a quiet study of certain aspects of the human mind" (Levi 5). Certainly Jewish law and, in particular, Bal Taschit, would fall into these studies. An intriguing aspect is his notion of motivation in Auschwitz. I propose

that his motivation came from nature and survival, influenced by his religious beliefs and adherence to Bal Taschit.

Deep into his incarceration at Auschwitz, Levi befriended a young man and shared some of their literary remembrances. These remembrances brought back many memories and recollections to Levi's mind. The reminiscences gave him added hope and an added sense of humanity. Sodi noted that this event showed that survival was more than just a physical process:

And yet, Levi extracts yet other lessons from Dante's Ulysses. The Greek hero's resounding exhortation to *seguir virtute e canoscenza* is the quintessence of the anti-Inferno. It is for Levi and Samuel *a fugiamus animo*, a chance to flee the concentration universe with their minds. It brings them to a place of dignity outside the Lager, perhaps to the pre-Lager days of high-minded scholarly and literary pursuits, of solidarity, of living outside oneself and not obsessively for oneself. Surviving Auschwitz was first a struggle of carnal endurance, amassing calories, avoiding blows, escaping selection. But survival wasn't endurance alone: psychogenic alacrity was equally important (Sodi 202).

Sodi mentions a place of dignity. It is this dignity and escapes that Holocaust victims looked for. If prisoners gained dignity and were able to flee the "inferno," then perhaps their chances of survival would increase. Sodi notes this by saying carnal endurance was not enough: one needed strength of mind and character. Physical prowess and luck alone were only part of the formula for survival in a concentration camp such as Auschwitz. This "psychogenic alacrity" was something important for inmates. It was something that Bal Taschit would be categorized as because it helped stimulate a sense of preservation and survival. It was a way of coping and managing life in an intolerable situation. Obviously, this trivial event is in Levi's writing because

he wants to show how secular and natural things were pivotal in the mental and physical well-being of inmates. If such an event could have life-altering consequences, then surely these remembrances and events were of utmost importance to researchers and biographers of the Holocaust.

Sodi went on to explain: “Why does Levi turn to Ulysses in Auschwitz? To avoid despair, to inflame (pun intended) his spirits to fight against impossible odds, to avoid the listless waiting that, on Calypso’s island as much as in the barbed-wire universe, led to waste and worse, and lastly to embrace a fraud and his lies as a way of avoiding the ‘either/or’ of Auschwitz and striking out a *terza via*” (Sodi 203). Levi’s previous educational experience not only saved him later in Auschwitz when he was able to secure a position in the lab, but also gave him hope and reminded him of his humanity. In his work *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi explored this issue in a chapter entitled “The Intellectual in Auschwitz”:

Culture could be useful: not often, not everywhere, not for everyone, but sometimes on certain rare occasions, precious as a precious stone, it was actually useful, and one felt almost lifted up from the ground – with the danger of crashing back down again, the pain being all the greater the higher and longer the exaltation lasted. Culture was useful to me. Not always, at times perhaps by subterranean and unforeseen paths, but it served me well and perhaps it saved me. They made it possible for me to reestablish a link with the past, saving it from oblivion and reinforcing my identity. (Levi 138-139).

Is it possible that Levi’s Jewish education and traditions also helped Levi? If his formal, secular education had an impact such as the one described, then it would be plausible for him to lean upon his own Jewish background. It would then be easy to negotiate these quotations and

instances to see how Bal Taschit would also play such an important role in his survival. Ian Thomson furthered this argument by quoting Levi: “If they were to survive, the Haftlinge needed something to hold on to: a religious faith, a friendship or some hope. Those of us who thought only of the next bowl of soup died in droves” (Thomson 164). It is Levi's own religious faith that gave him an edge. Even when he was given a better job within the polymerization plant, he still relied on this faith and this harmony with nature to better his chances. As Levi noted: “Not only during the crucial moments of the selection or the aerial bombings but also in the grind of everyday life, the believers lived better” (Levi 146). Thomson spoke of Levi's own personal traits. However, I believe these align with his religious adherence and curiosity in nature that also helped his spirit to flourish and his hopes rise. As Thomson writes: “His vigilant intelligence—what elsewhere he called his habit of 'detached curiosity'--was a bastion against death and a sort of moral armour in a place where it was 'extremely easy to die spiritually'. Levi was only able to exercise his curiosity because of his fierce will to live. He was a young man with his life before him, he had no dependants who were suffering; and somewhere he must have found the belief that he could hold out to the war's end” (Thomson 164). Yet having will alone would not suffice. Something had to drive that will and give it shape and form. Each author enjoyed nature and incorporated natural themes in their literature. Although they may not have been aware of Bal Taschit, through the events and stories within their works, these authors show the relationship of Jews to nature.

Primo Levi especially loved the natural world. In his youth, Levi enjoyed hiking. Even during the fall of the Fascist state and rise of the Nazi presence in Italy, he went on trips to escape the nightmare of what was happening. It was these trips that kept him from destruction, that preserved his sanity. According to Thompson, “He had set out from Milan with Silvio



Ortona to climb the 3,680-metre Monte della Disgrazia peak south of the Bregaglia mountains” (Thomson 114). “During the trudge, Levi had shown a keen interest in all manner of alpine phenomena, from glaciers to marmots . . . Primo kept asking . . . why men had to kill each other, he seemed astounded by the world's malignancy” (Thomson 131). This philosophical question is interesting to note because it is the first time Levi appears to be thinking in terms of the violence and destruction that was going on around him. Since this malignancy and opposition is appalling to Levi, it shows how he was against the destruction of nature and mankind.

Levi's time in his first internment camp was actually a pleasant one in comparison to that which was to come. Thomson described it: “It was not such a bad place: beyond the electric fences and observation towers stretched picturesque farmland and rice fields” (Thomson 145). Once again he turns to nature to give solace and comfort to him while in duress. By holding on to his faith and by exercising his interest in the natural world, he better prepared himself for the mental challenge of the next concentration camp.

Interaction with environment and with others is at the heart of Bal Taschit. For example: “...the restrictive principle of Bal Taschit conveyed a message...Responsible interaction with the environment offers men and women the deepest personal and spiritual fulfillment, while environmental irresponsibility will lead to their physical and spiritual demise” (Cohen 79). According to the scholar Joseph Gindi, Bal Taschit is a concept that: “teaches us that the world is all we have and that we must treat it as a treasure” (Gindi 47). When others think of Bal Taschit as a natural concept, they may only look at it with a narrow view. They may see something that only concerns things within the natural world. Yet, Bal Taschit has as much to do with humanity as it does with plants and trees. As Levi furthered this argument he noted that: “To he that has will be given; to he that has not, will be taken away . . . In the Lager, where man is alone, and

where the struggle for life is reduced to its primordial mechanism, this unjust law is openly in force, is recognized by all” (Levi 80). This shows that the law of Bal Taschit is mainly aimed at the destruction of nature, but it can be applied to the destruction of anything within “creation.” As the researcher E.L. Allen noted, nature is not just trees and animals of the forest: “The Hebrew view of nature has a depth which is lacking to the first and the robustness which is sadly needed by the second. For the men of the Bible nature is never seen in abstraction even from God or from the tasks which he has assigned to man in the world. Nature is envisioned as one of the spheres in which God meets man personally and in which he is called upon to exercise responsibility” ( Allen 81). Therefore, if this knowledge and theory is applied to the writings of Levi, it can deduced that the German destruction as more than just murder. It was a systematic way of destroying God’s people and His creation. The Germans were everything Bal Taschit stood against. Yet the natural world also became a torturer. As one survivor remembered: “The sun, source of heat and light and life itself, turns red, turns black—the sun was destruction and the moon, that habitual inspiration for poets and lovers, symbol of romance and longing, the moon too was destruction!” (Langer 298). But should the responsibility for destruction only be in the minds of those who follow Bal Taschit? As Fishbane argued: “Man bears the responsibility for the destruction—complete or incomplete, direct or indirect of all objects that may be of potential benefit or use to mankind. As part of the divine plan of creation himself, man has the obligation to respect his inanimate and animate counterparts in the world” (Hefland 1). Within this context it is apparent that destroying humans is an act against God, an act in defiance of Bal Taschit.

It would seem natural for those in torture and bondage to band together. Just as the Hebrew slaves endured together and rose up as one, it would appear that the Jews in the

Holocaust would come together to fight collectively against this wanton destruction. Yet Levi points out this was not always the case:

There was little feeling of camaraderie among us. It was confined to compatriots, and even toward them it was weakened by the minimal life conditions. It was actually zero, indeed negative, with regard to newcomers. In this and many other respects we had greatly retrogressed and become hardened. And in the “new” fellow prisoner we tended to see an alien, an oafish, cumbersome barbarian who took up space and time, and bread, who did not know the unspoken but ironclad rules of coexistence and survival, and who, moreover, complained (and for the wrong reasons) in an irritating and ridiculous manner because just a few days back he was still at home, or at least outside the barbed wire (Levi 69).

This caste system was a by-product of the inhuman conditions and treatment meted out by the Germans. They calculated and encouraged such divisions among the prisoners because it increased the death toll and decimated any partisan activity. It, too, was a form of destruction and falls under Levi’s interpretation of Bal Taschit. Even at the war’s end, when all seemed lost for the Germans, their system of dehumanization and destruction continued on a philosophical scale. Levi quotes an SS officer in *The Drowned and the Saved*. His chilling prophecy is the mindset of the Nazis, and was yet one more reason for Levi to hold on and survive:

However this war may end, we have won the war against you; none of you will be left to bear witness, but even if someone were to survive, the world will not believe him. There will perhaps be suspicions, discussions, research by historians, but there will be no certainties, because we will destroy the evidence together with you. And even if some proof should remain and some of you

survive, people will say that the events you describe are too monstrous to be believed: they will say that they are the exaggerations of Allied propaganda and will believe us, who will deny everything, and not you. We will be the ones to dictate the history of the Lagers (Levi 11-12).

The destruction of comradeship and property is overwhelming, but perhaps the worst destruction was that of memory. How can one appreciate Bal Taschit and cling to hope when staring at nature when one's own identity has been erased? As Levi pointed out, the amount of work and lack of positive relationships reduced memory and hope:

When one works, one suffers and there is no time to think: our homes are less than a memory. But here the time is ours: from bunk to bunk, despite the prohibition, we exchange visits and we talk and we talk. The wooden hut, crammed with suffering humanity, is full of words, memories and of another pain. "Hemweh" the Germans call this pain; it is a beautiful word, it means "longing for one's home (Levi 49).

Later, near the end of his memoir, he explains that memory can become something abstract and far away: "Memory is a curious instrument: ever since I have been in camp, two lines written by a friend of mine a long time ago have been running through my mind: ". . .Until one day / there will be no more sense in saying: tomorrow" (Levi 121). Levi summed up this brutal program of erasure in a shorter work entitled *Opere*. He recalled that: "The demolition of a man is difficult, almost as much as creating one" (Levi 20). The difficulty in waging a war against Bal Taschit is evident because Levi asserts that the demolition of man is not an easy task.

The Germans had to take away property, comradeship, memory, and individuality. They had to destroy all of creation before their task would be complete. This is what Bal Taschit was

written for. It is more than a prohibition; it is a commission to remember and to know who you are. As Cohen noted:

A responsible Jewish approach to environmental problems cannot afford to deny or neglect its own lineage. Rather, it must commence from a focus through which one can best appreciate the halachic principle most pertinent to environmental preservation: Bal Taschit. The rabbis set limits on human interference with the natural order not in their Midrash on the Genesis cosmogony, but in their reflection on Deuteronomy 20:19–20” (Cohen 77).

Levi presents his religion not in explicit terms but in his conduct and in his matter-of-fact event depictions. Yet there is insight into his loss of humanity and individuality. The loss of culture and lineage, or Jewish heritage, was one of the factors Levi cites as breaking men down. The result is what he calls the “musselman,” a walking corpse. Survival in Auschwitz depended on a mindset of self-preservation. This will, of course, lead to base selfishness, but I believe that Levi discovered that it took more than isolation to survive. With the help of friends and allies who swapped property, food, and language with him, Levi was able to gain an advantage of the common inmate. The importance of maintaining relationships and keeping in unity with all of creation becomes paramount. Frunza continued this thought on Levi by saying: “With his testimony, Levi denounces this deconstruction of community into radically isolated individuals, ready to fight for survival without considering other consequences. He tries to resist the tendency to atomize the victims and their collective voice through the call to memory” (Frunza 44). The use of memory by Levi is another tool to help coordinate his comrades and fight against the destruction and division imposed by the Germans. By remembering the past and remembering

what natural life is like, Levi and his comrades were able to combat the dehumanization and denaturalization of their existence in the camp.

The main reason for the Holocaust was to rid Europe of the Jewish population. The Germans were intent on destroying Jewish religion. Levi's faith, like that of millions of others, wavers when he comes to Auschwitz. Yet his resolve to survive and to hold onto his past were powerful tools that increased his survival chances. Fishbane concludes about his own faith: "My world and language in the core of my commitments are all Jewish. The classics of the tradition condition my sensibilities, inspiring exegetical possibilities that ring true in my soul. Thus, my subjectivity is at once shaped by the past and by the present, and the interpretive entanglements that emerge are the mixed weave of traditional and contemporary concerns" (Fishbane 18). This sense of preservation and commitments to Jewish tenets strongly suggest that *Bal Taschit* was, in fact, if not explicit, was implicit in Levi's everyday struggle with the continuation of life. Frunza points out Levi's reaction to concentration camp life in relation to religious beliefs: "Levi does not show special interest in religious issues. However, the state of total crisis in which prisoners' lives are lived reflects the total crisis that takes place in the human world and also in the world of the divine. It is not an exaggeration to speak of a double exile—the exile of man and the exile of God" (Frunza 40).

Alone, separated from his family, his only tangible link to his past were his memories of his family, nature, and religion. Frunza continues this idea: "There are authors who believe that the literary description of an extreme experience has the role of bringing back a dimension of epiphany or even a form of religiosity" (Frunza 45). Perhaps Levi's adherence to *Bal Taschit*, his willingness to preserve and not destroy his identity, memory or religion are what kept this man alive for so long within Dante's *Inferno*:

Scholars have insisted that “the internal logic of the development of Levi’s ideas presupposes that his experience must be taken to a level that surpasses that of the individual, and that his ideas must be integrated into contemporary debates about how to live in a world in which the Holocaust could take place and in which there is no guarantee from the rest of society that the tragic experience of the Jews will not be repeated (Frunza 38).

Frunza further notes that: “A generic character is anticipated here, one who is cast away from his own life, abandoned somewhere at life’s margins, and who no longer seems able to distinguish between his own death, which came with the loss of his humanity, and the death of death, which presupposes a return to life through the desperate clinging to anything that could mean reaching the road to salvation” (Frunza 42). This anticipation of generic character comes from the captors, the Germans. They anticipated death and division among the inmates. They wanted the numbers to decrease by “natural” means. The more divisive and confused the prisoners were, the less likely they were to revolt or to live. Everything was individualism; there would be no sense of community or collective. No former attachments, even familial, would be allowed. Indeed, National Socialism became the antithesis of Bal Taschit. With National Socialism, survival of the fittest and a “master race” ideology are important. Compare this to Bal Taschit which does not allow destruction on any level, Jew or gentile, master race or other.

In his novel *If This is a Man*, Levi asserts that: “We are in fact convinced that no human experience is without meaning or unworthy of analysis and that fundamental values, even if they are not positive, can be deduced from this particular world which we are describing” (Levi 102). What was this world? It was the world of Dante’s *Inferno*. It was a world in which Levi, Frank, and Wiesel had all experienced to some degree. Levi states they had:

Lived for months or years in a ghetto, tormented by chronic hunger, fatigue, promiscuity, and humiliation; that he has seen die around him, one by one, his beloved; that he is cut off from the world, unable to receive or transmit news; that, finally, he is loaded onto a train, eighty or a hundred persons to a boxcar; that he travels into the unknown, blindly, for sleepless days and nights; and that he is at last flung inside the walls of an indecipherable inferno (Levi 59).

I believe that in this description, as well as others, Primo Levi summed up the hearts and minds of those who experienced the Holocaust. Nevertheless, more than this he showed that there was more to survival than luck and persistence. One has to have a goal and purpose, a sense of community and direction. Without a hint of Bal Taschit then, the notion of preservation and ties to community and nature, I think that Levi and his fellow survivors may have been part of the six million victims. By his knowledge of chemistry, the natural world, love of nature and hiking, and a kinship with others, Levi ensured his survival and exercised his mind and heart in order to buoy his spirits.



### CHAPTER 3: WIESEL'S WAR ON DESTRUCTION

In the writings of Anne Frank and Primo Levi, Bal Taschit runs throughout their time within captivity. Research into Wiesel's work reveals that Bal Taschit became a way for Jews to cope and to manage their existence during a period of chaos. Ellie Wiesel is an author and survivor who explores many sides of the Holocaust. As Eli Pfefferkorn noted in his article on Wiesel entitled "Elie Wiesel: The Inward Eyewitness in The Testament," Wiesel used introspection as a key component of analyzing his faith and surroundings. In an article on Wiesel, Eli Pfefferkorn noted: "Wiesel uses his witnessing inward eye and his poetic talent to see into the thing itself, beyond the fleeting moment. He shows the misery and despair on a physical and philosophical level. As his narrative unfolds we sink further into the oblivion of the hell he has painted with words" (Pfefferkorn 3). As Eilon Schwartz wrote, "For Jews to confront the environmental crisis as part of a rich and complex Jewish tradition, it is necessary to come to terms with both sides of the tradition and to understand the interrelationship between them" (Schwartz 437). The sides referenced in this quote are that of spiritual and natural. Schwartz says in this passage that Jews see Bal Taschit as both a secular protection as well as spiritual help. Wiesel still manages to bring the reader's mood and feeling back to one of hope through faith and recognition of higher laws:

Through the blue-tinged skylights I could see the darkness gradually fading. I had ceased to feel fear. And then I was overcome by an inhuman weariness. Those absent no longer touched even the surface of our memories . . . Our senses were blunted; everything was blurred as in a fog. It was no longer to grasp anything. The instincts of self-preservation, of self-defense, of pride, had all deserted us. In one ultimate moment of lucidity it seemed to me that we were damned souls wandering in the half-world, souls condemned

to wander through space till the generations of man came to an end, seeking their redemption, seeking oblivion –without hope of finding it. (Wiesel 45).

Where could he find redemption?

Elie Wiesel has been unafraid to examine every aspect of his time spent in captivity. His struggles with his faith and humanity have opened up many questions concerning the life and minds of concentration camp inmates. He struggled to see how human beings could inflict such damage on innocents. Since *Bal Taschit* is a law that primarily deals with nature, one must first analyze Wiesel's natural allusions and imagery. There are few explicit instances of nature within his works, but his philosophies and instances show many connections. The hope and despair found in others was a cause for Wiesel to ponder his own faith and motivation to live. Through this soul-searching, Wiesel comes at odds with the wanton killing and cruelty of the Germans. He found that only through faith and adherence to a cause or belief could one forgo the crematorium. This faith-finding and religious exercise is much a part of *Bal Taschit*, for Wiesel was fighting alongside the tenets of *Bal Taschit*. They both were bringing down those that would try to destroy all.

The most profound insight that Wiesel gives into the Holocaust is the importance of living for something. Wiesel writes: "So now, muster your strength, and don't lose heart. We shall all see the day of liberation. Have faith in life. Above all else, have faith. Drive out despair, and you will keep death away from yourselves. We are all brothers, and we are all suffering the same fate. Help one another. It is the only way to survive" (Wiesel *Night* 50). From his description of their worries, not only can one see how faith helped lift up the spirits of the suffering, but also Wiesel's devotion and his regard for spirituality. With this knowledge and

devotion, he must have been somewhat aware of Bal Taschit, especially considering his training as a young person.

Wiesel's studies of the Kabbalah are another aspect of his faith. He notes the reliance on spirituality and religion that kept his master going: "Still lost in his cabbalistic dreams, Akiba Drumer had discovered a verse in the Bible which, interpreted in terms of numerology, enabled him to predict that the deliverance was due within the coming weeks" (59). Akiba was relying on Jewish doctrine to help cope with the insurmountable odds, even using it to predict, falsely, his deliverance. Wiesel lamented that: "Poor Akiba Drumer, if he could have gone on believing in God, if he could have seen a proof of God in this Calvary, he would not have been taken by the selection. But as soon as he felt the first cracks forming in his faith, he had lost his reason for struggling and had begun to die" (83). This reliance on God and Jewish tradition as a way to combat destruction shows that Bal Taschit can encompass many forms of preservation, even hope and faith. Elie's determination to survive despite all obstacles sprang from his Jewish beliefs: "We should show God that even here, in this enclosed hell, we were capable of singing His praises" (76). This passage shows his connection to deity is strong.

Before the war, Wiesel had extensive religious training. This prepared him for his Holocaust experience. Wiesel recollected: "My former classmates and I sporadically continued our study of the sacred texts, most often meeting in Ezra Malek's garden. We would sit on the grass under a tree and ponder complex problems relating to fasting or holidays. Perhaps analyzing the positions of Rav and his adversary Shmuel would help us forget the ever more pressing danger" (Wiesel, *Night* 65). This passage suggests that even while being evacuated, Wiesel finds time to study and ponder. He said: "There were two boys attached to our group...they and I very soon became friends. Having once belonged to a Zionist youth

organization, they knew innumerable Hebrew chants. Thus we would often hum tunes evoking the calm waters of Jordan and the majestic sanctity of Jerusalem” (58). The researcher Frunza compared Wiesel to another Holocaust writer and they were students of the same religious master. Frunza commented that: “It is common knowledge that Levinas and Wiesel, without knowing each other, were at the same time students of the same Talmudic master, Chouchani. Their common Biblical and Talmudic experience may explain the presence in both of them of affirming the necessity of an ethic of responsibility” (Frunza 95). Wiesel’s devout Judaism is an indicator that he was aware of Bal Taschit and may have even had the concepts of Bal Taschit in the back of his mind. He even off-handedly mentions part of the law of Bal Taschit: “And I, I think of the biblical law that, out of compassion for animals, forbids the slaughter of an ox and his calf on the same day. The Germans, however, did not shrink from killing a father and son together, without a second thought, as one would step on two insects” (Wiesel 73). Contrast this with the Nazi cruelty of sending entire families into the gas chambers at once and it shows how Wiesel aligns himself with a Godly natural law.

Wiesel’s devotion to his family and faith is one of the endearing sentiments that run throughout *Night*. The reader also gets the feeling that his closeness with deity helped him to sort out the weighing psychological torment and complexes. As he said in the midst of his suffering: “God is everywhere, even in suffering and in the very heart of punishment” (103). Even before the horrors of the concentration camp, when all was uncertain, Wiesel relied on his faith in God, coupled with a reassurance from nature: "A wind of calmness and reassurance blew through our houses" (16). His instincts and teachings would help him later as he suffers in misery within the camps. He describes these instincts as: "The instincts of self-preservation, of self-defense, of pride, had all deserted us. In one ultimate moment of lucidity it seemed to me

that we were damned souls wandering in the half-world, souls condemned to wander through space till the generations of man came to an end, seeking their redemption, seeking oblivion -- without hope of finding it" (45). What else, other than his faith in God and his creation, could Wiesel rely on?

Wiesel uses natural imagery in his works to show the impact the natural world had on the average prisoner. For instance, when he arrives in camp, he observes: "It was a beautiful day in May. The fragrance of spring was in the air. The sun was setting in the west" (49). He continues, "Outside the sunshine warmed us. Our morale was much improved" (50). Wiesel says that morale is relative to the natural world and to weather. After a long march, he remarked: "At last, the morning star appeared in the gray sky. A trail of indeterminate light showed on the horizon. We were exhausted. We were without strength, without illusions" (93). The hope found within this passage lies in the star, a natural element. It shows that even though they are without illusions and know their fate, there is still a glimmer of hope within the arrival of the morning star. This is also an allusion to heaven, or God, and that they were looking upward for answers and for salvation. The scholar Benj Mahle proposed that Wiesel combined images of nature along with the hope for the intervention of God. Mahle stated: "For as he details the horrors being perpetrated by men, he consistently contrasts these with benign, even appealing images of nature. Since we frequently perceive nature as a reflection of God, is it not possible to interpret these images as evidence of God's concern?" (Mahle 83). The use of nature as a medicine against horror is a great part of *Bal Taschit*. This use draws a line between good and evil, with nature as good and destruction as evil. Wiesel told of the warnings they had received: "Hungarian Jews, don't let yourselves be locked into ghettos, don't get into the cattle cars! Flee, hide in the caves, take refuge in the woods!" (Wiesel 63). By seeking refuge in nature, such as

the caves and woods, they receive protection from transports and ghettos. Only in nature can they find an escape.

Elie Wiesel stated: "You must never lose faith, even when the sword hangs over your head. That's the teaching of our sages" (Wiesel *Night* 40). Wiesel followed the teachings he had learned as a boy, and followed the counsel within this statement. In an article published after his imprisonment, Wiesel commented on his faith and the faith of those who suffered alongside him. He commented on his traditions by saying: "As a Jew I abide by my tradition. And my tradition allows, and indeed commands, man to take the Almighty to task for what is being done to His people, to His children . . . and all men are His children -provided the questioner does so on behalf of His children, not against them, from within the community, from within the human condition, and not as an outsider" (Wiesel, *Trial* 1.176). This wrestling with faith helped Wiesel develop a deeper understanding of what he believed and what helped him survive. This relationship between religion and ethics is a framework that can be understood within Bal Taschit. Religion and ethics both are concerned with moral issues and law. As Frunza noted: "One can seize the complex relations between ethical and religious aspects in limit situations. Such a situation can be illustrated using Elie Wiesel's reflections on the Holocaust" (Frunza 95). In a limited situation such as concentration camp imprisonment, ethical and religious laws such as Bal Taschit, or do not destroy, are tested. Wiesel wrestles, just as Levi did, with the concept of God. This is especially true when he is faced with the death and misery of all around him. Roth stated that despite this, Wiesel was still faithful, and it is legitimate to believe that he used Bal Taschit to keep this faith. Roth states: "Elie Wiesel is fiercely humanistic. His humanism, however, remains tied to God. The lesson here is that, without enlivening and testing those ties and, in particular, their ways of being for and against humankind, a critical resource for saving

life and mending the world will be lost” (Roth 69). Some of this soul-searching and religious exploration are in part due to Wiesel’s Hasidic leanings. Roth furthered the information on Wiesel’s learning by noting:

Some of Elie Wiesel’s most forceful writing involves the Jewish tradition known as Hasidism. Many features impress him as he traces this movement from its flowering in eighteenth-century Europe, to its presence in the death camps, and to its continuing influence in a world that came close to annihilating Hasidic ways root and branch. One of the rhythms of understanding and doing stressed by Wiesel derives, at least in part, from a Hasidic awareness of the relationships between being for- being against. Hasidism, in particular, combines a genuine awe of God with direct and emotional reactions toward God. It finds God eluding under-standing but also as One to whom people can speak. The Hasidic masters argue with God, protest against God, fear, trust, and love God. All of this is done personally and passionately, without compromising God's majesty and beyond fear of contradiction (Roth 68).

This relationship with God and creation on a personal level is also indicative of Wiesel’s intuitive feel for Bal Taschit, as well as other Jewish law and custom. Frunza noted that Wiesel’s faith was a powerful tool: “We must acknowledge that the transforming power of faith is also central to his vision. Even if faith is constructed as mutiny against faith, it is still key in Wiesel’s thought. The appeal to faith seems to me inevitable in understanding the meaning of memory in Wiesel” (Frunza 103). By remembering, by having faith and looking at nature and God, Wiesel was completing preservation, a task within Bal Taschit. It is portrayed poignantly in Wiesel’s arrival after the long march from his town: "At last we reached our destination. Throwing our

bags to the ground, we sank down: "Oh God, Lord of the Universe, take pity upon us in thy great mercy" (Wiesel 29). Even in the darkest of settings, he still relies on his beliefs and Jewish tradition as a means of self-preservation.

As stated previously, the cruelty in the camps violated the tenets of Bal Taschit. The Germans had complete authority over everything in camp. As prisoners enter the camp, they receive signs and verbal warnings: "From this moment, you come under the authority of the German army" (33). Upon entrance, their identity leaves. It was the program of the Nazis to destroy everything, and just like Levi, Wiesel picks up on this calculated suffering. Frunza states that this correlated to Wiesel's faith as well:

I must stress the fact that this superimposing of the image of the suffering man and the suffering God establishes a correlation between man and God; it opens itself towards a place of encounter where the human being is removed from the status of anonymous dehumanization and is placed in the hypostasis of a being inhabited by God. The memory of the Holocaust appears in a new light, which emphasizes this dynamics of restoration and of inhabitation in a common responsibility toward the suffering of the other (Frunza 100).

The collective responsibility for others opposes the Germans' vision for concentration camp life. In their view, each person looks after himself; any groups or collectives would only raise morale and foster rebellion. When Frunza talks of anonymous dehumanization, he refers to the system of destruction in the Holocaust.

Frunza furthers his argument by agreeing with the philosophy of Wiesel in that: "I want to place emphasis on the fact that ethics, faith and memory act as a common force that may result



in the annihilation of evil” (Frunza 104). Despite the efforts of the Germans to eradicate Jewish humanity and philosophy, the initiative by faithful followers such as Wiesel ensures that the Jewish traditions would carry on. Frunza’s depiction of Wiesel’s plight is apt:

By analyzing *Night*, as well as Wiesel’s other writings, we discover a picture in which, in the conditions of the death camps, humans enter a process of full dehumanization, and seems God totally absent from history. I believe that today, retrospection enables us to see the Holocaust as a special force that holds the power to contribute to the restoration of the human condition and of God’s presence in history. Through these lenses, I think one may understand the apparent inadequacy between, on the one side, several instances of Eliezer’s behavior that look like signs of rebellion against God in the circumstances of the death camp, and, on the other side, Wiesel’s openness to faith and his refusal to be associated in any manner with the theologies of the Death of God (Frunza 97).

Restoration of the human condition is a key phrase within this passage. The Nazis viewed Jews as vermin, something to get rid of. The dehumanization was complete when inmates were tattooed with numbers, separated from family, and shorn of their hair. The core of Nazi ideology was the survival of the fittest, a Darwinist theory on humans. Judaism, with its emphasis on humanity and justice, was in opposition to this philosophy. Eilon Schwartz embellished this idea: “Judaism (and Christianity] interfere with the natural order by letting the weak survive. A morality which changes the natural order prevents nature from taking its rightful course” (Schwartz 32). She prefaced this information with Nazi ideology, saying: “Borrowing heavily from Nietzsche, Hitler believed that nature teaches us the basic laws of morality: that the strong kill the weak and through such a process, nature moves forward” (Schwartz 30). Yet Bal

Taschit is a means of combatting destruction, and that nature moves forward with conservation, not a “weeding out” process.

Wiesel’s writings on the sufferings within the camps are a difficult read. But they give us insight into not only his mind, but the mind of the average Jew, and how they implicitly fought against the Nazis and their dehumanizing force. Roth stated that Wiesel’s writings give us something of the Jewish spirit. He concludes:

Moving through night into dawn and day, Elie Wiesel's first works travel through the destruction of a supportive universe into a post- Holocaust world of ambiguity and nothingness in which life almost succeeds in fulfilling a desire to cancel itself. Plumbing such depths had to be the prelude to Wiesel's hard-won insistence that the essence of being Jewish is "never to give up - never to yield to despair (Roth 60).

Elie Wiesel is a personification of the teachings of Bal Taschit. By exploring his own faith and continuing to study and meditate on his earlier learning, he was able to keep his mind sharp and his hopes up. His fundamental theme and message since liberation has been faith and remembrance. Perhaps the greatest calamity that could befall humankind is the repetition of the Holocaust and by destroying memory, by destroying the natural tendency to pass down information and experience, one would disobey the law of Bal Taschit. As a writer, Wiesel incorporates his thoughts and philosophies into the narrative. It is more than just a story; it is a treatise on the application of Bal Taschit. For instance, when Wiesel describes the morning star or the sun, he is saying look out among you at nature, do not get distracted by misery or plight, this is your salvation. John K. Roth noted:

Abraham and Isaac, Moses, and Job - these "messengers of God," as Wiesel calls them, understood that men and women abuse the freedom to choose that makes life human. They also wrestled with the fact that human existence neither accounts for nor completely sustains itself. Their dearly earned reckoning with that reality led them to a profound restiveness. It revealed, in turn, the awesome injunction that God intends for humankind to have hard, even impossible, moral work until and through death (Roth 67).

Humanity does not completely sustain itself on food, water, and shelter. What else, then, sustains human existence? What is the guardian against destruction other than religious and ethical laws that help people such as Jewish prisoners survive carnal devastation? Surely, this is Bal Taschit, the law of consecration, of sacrifice and preservation. It is embodied in Elie Wiesel because he lived it throughout his period of internment. He reached out to his God and to his beliefs to establish a connection to the natural world and to his past. It is as riveting a sermon as was given by Moses or Aaron. In a reflection on Wiesel's works, Michon Matthiesen writes: "Wiesel appears to be engaged in a fundamental, theological anthropology. His vision addresses the large aim of regenerating the human voice, of recreating "subjects", to use Metz's term - before God" (Matthiesen 50). Not only was Wiesel adherent to his faith, he attempted to spread or recreate subjects. As Eli Pfefferkorn further related: "Wiesel regards individual testimony, carried by word of mouth or inscribed in letters, as a cumulative process in which collective memory is tantamount to ethnic survival; oblivion, in contrast, equates with the death of a people and its culture" (Pfefferkorn 3). Therefore, not only should one be concerned with their relationship to the environment, but should also keep a collective memory so that such abuses shall not be repeated.

Wiesel differs from Anne Frank and Primo Levi in that he shows all aspects of concentration life and incorporates religious teaching and philosophy into daily life. His upbringing and culture also gives a different perspective on how Bal Taschit played a role in the Holocaust. Anne Frank experienced the psychological and emotional torment of the Holocaust, yet there is little knowledge about her actual imprisonment at Belsen. Levi's experiences were uneven because he gained suitable employment at Auschwitz which eased his suffering. Levi also focused more on his narrative than an overall picture of his beliefs. Wiesel suffered as much as any of the common prisoners and his writing equalizes the physical and psychological torment and thought. At times, he struggles with his own beliefs, such as when his father is brutally beaten to death for no reason. He struggles with his devotion when a young saboteur is executed in front of the entire camp. Yet despite his lack of authority and downcast mood at times, Wiesel found his control and voice through perseverance and faith. Wiesel's tale is also more powerful and relevant to modern readers because he is still alive and is at the forefront of the Judaic world. Wiesel is still standing up for his faith and is still calling for remembrance and preservation of Holocaust memories and the ideals of human rights.

As he says near the end of *Night*: "We were masters of nature, masters of the world. We had forgotten everything –death, fatigue, our natural needs. Stronger than cold or hunger, stronger than the shots and the desire to die, condemned and wandering, mere numbers, we were the only men on earth" (Wiesel 93). Once again, Wiesel emphasizes memory as a saving grace. Remembering that they are men while forgetting their physical needs is comparable to sacrificing for God. By preserving himself, Wiesel felt that he was fulfilling his duty to God and to Bal Taschit. Without his adherence to this law, and without his meditation, study, and remembrance, he would have succumbed to death. Judaic researcher Norman Lamm condensed the idea of Bal

Taschit into a simple explanation: “The Torah forbids wanton destruction... Vandalism against nature entails the violation of a biblical prohibition. According to one medieval authority, the purpose of the commandment is to train man to love the good by abstaining from all destructiveness” (Lamm 166). With someone so dedicated to his faith and to his religion, Bal Taschit must have played a role in Elie Wiesel’s deliverance.

## CONCLUSION

Through this thesis, I have tried to show how the Biblical law of Bal Taschit influenced Holocaust victims. The writings of Anne Frank, Primo Levi, and Elie Wiesel are indicators of the role played by Bal Taschit in the minds and events of each writer. Although each writer's experience differed in both severity and location, each implicitly used Bal Taschit to buoy their hope for survival and faith in God.

In a thesis on Jewish environmental literature, Joseph Gindi stated: "The parameters of bal Taschit stake out a position of opposition to totally wasteful destruction" (Gindi 91). In light of this position, Bal Taschit can be compared to an oath or covenant. It is between the Judaic people and God to promise not to destroy and perhaps not let them be destroyed by other forces. This principle is applied liberally, even outside the sphere of the natural world. It is not just for trees, but also for humans and animals as well. The wanton destruction of cities and nations during World War II would no doubt be considered to be in opposition to this oath.

Anne Frank's hidden annex tested her ability to cope in a cramped and uncertain environment. This test was handled with the help of Bal Taschit because Frank looked outward to nature for relief and comfort. Her story is unique because unlike Levi and Wiesel, she never knew her work would be published. It is an unblemished and unflinching account of a young Jewish girl using her religious beliefs to overcome adversity. Her faith was strong, and her famous entry echoes this: "It's really a wonder that I haven't dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. . . Yet, I keep them, because in spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart" (Frank 263). What else, other than a belief in good and in preservation of humanity, is a better representation of Bal Taschit?

Through the chemist, Primo Levi, the world gains a glimpse into a horrific concentration camp. One must question their own beliefs after reading passages about transports, selections, and gas chambers. Then, how much more impressive is it that Levi could remain faithful and hopeful in the midst of such suffering? Through his works, it is apparent that one would not only need to follow the law of the camp, but also a higher law, in order to survive.

Elie Wiesel, the imminent scholar and Nobel Prize winner, is probably the best example of a Holocaust writer who reflected Jewish law, including Bal Taschit, in his writings. Just a youth, his memories and experiences show a deeper sense of theological awareness than his other fellow inmates. It also showed that he was more than just a child, that he was aware of the implications of nature and his surroundings.

For there to be a better awareness of Bal Taschit and its effects expressed in Holocaust literature, scholars will need to look at the writings of Frank, Levi, and Wiesel. They will also need to connect these major works with minor Holocaust authors. Although there is a large amount of research available on the history and effects of the Holocaust, more needs to be done with regards to Bal Taschit and nature. Since ecocriticism is a popular field of research, it would be wise for scholars to employ the insights and terminology developed by this critical school further as it might apply to the Holocaust. In his work *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, Lawrence Buell noted, “Ecocentrism is more compelling as a call to fellow humans to recognize the intractable, like-it-or-not interdependence that subsists between the human and the nonhuman and to tread more lightly on the earth than it is a practical program” (Buell 102). Buell states that the interdependence between humankind and nature is at the core of ecocentrism. Nevertheless, as shown in this thesis, Bal Taschit and Jewish ecology also calls humans to recognize this interdependence.

Through this thesis the idea of Bal Taschit becoming more than a religious principle has shed new light on these authors' works. This thesis has shown that the graphic accounts of misery and violence within these works are balanced with a connection to nature. Although death and despair were rampant, the faith and hopes of these authors were lifted by connecting with the natural world. Bal Taschit is a way for Holocaust researchers to show the true spirit of those who were in captivity and how their faith and law became a protection.



## WORKS CITED

- Allen, E.L. *Judaism and Environmental Ethics: A Reader*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2001. Print.
- Bartky, Elliot. "Why the Jews?" *The Review of Politics* 73.2 (2011): 345-49. *Cambridge Journals*. Web. 4 December 2012.
- Buell, Lawrence. *The Future of Environmental Criticism*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005. Print.
- Chiarello, Barbara. "The Utopian Space of a Nightmare": A Scholarly Look at The Diary of Anne Frank. *Utopian Studies*. 5.1 (1999): 85-99. *Jstor*. Web. 12 December 2012.
- Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life. "Bal Taschit: the development of a Jewish environmental principle." *Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life*, Jewish Council for Public Affairs, 2007. Web. 1 January 2013.
- Cohen, Jeremy. *"Be Fertile and Increase, Fill the Earth and Master It": The Ancient and Medieval Career of a Biblical Text*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989. Print.
- Feldhay Brenner, Rachel. "Writing Herself Against History: Anne Frank's Self-Portrait as a Young Artist." *Modern Judaism* 16.2 (1996): 105-34. *Johns Hopkins University Press database*. Web. 5 October 2012.
- Fishbane Michael. "Toward a Jewish Theology of Nature." *Judaism and Ecology: Created World and Revealed Word*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *'Governmentality' Ideology and Consciousness Governing the Present*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979. Print.
- Frank, Anne. *The Diary of a Young Girl: The Definitive Edition*. New York: Bantam, 1995. Print.

- Frunza, Sandu. "Ethics, religion and memory in Elie Wiesel's Night". *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 9.26 (2010): 94. SACRI. Web. 6 Feb. 2013.
- Gindi, Joseph. "Greening the Torah: The Use of Classical Texts in Jewish Environmentalist Literature". The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2011. United States – North Carolina: *ProQuest Dissertations & Theses (PQDT)*. Web. 1 Mar. 2013.
- Glotfelty, Cheryll; Fromm, Harold. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996. Print.
- Greene, Joshua M.; Kumar, Shiva. *Witness: Voices from the Holocaust*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000. Print.
- Hefland, Jonathan. *The Earth is the Lord's: Judaism and Environmental Ethics. Torah of the Earth: Exploring 4,000 Years of Ecology in Jewish Thought*. Woodstock, Vt: Jewish Lights, 2000. Print.
- Hirsch, Samson Raphael. *Horeb: A Philosophy of Jewish Laws and Observances*. New York: Soncino Press, 2002. Print.
- Langer, Lawrence L. "Hearing the Holocaust". *Poetics Today* 27.2 (2006): 297-309. *Duke University Press Journals Online*. Web. 3 November 2012.
- Lamm, Norman. *Faith and Doubt: Studies in Traditional Jewish Thought*. Jersey City: KTAV Publishing House, 2006. Print.
- Levi, Primo. *Survival in Auschwitz*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Drowned and the Saved*. New York: Summit Books, 1988. Print.
- Mahle, Benj. "Junior High/Middle School: The Power of Ambiguity: Elie Wiesel's 'Night'". *The English Journal* 74.6 (1985): 83-84. *JSTOR*. Web. 1 January 2013.

- Matthiesen, Michon Marie. "Narrative of Suffering: Complementary Reflections of Theological Anthropology in Johann Metz and Elie Wiesel". *Religion & Literature* 18.2 (1986): 47-63. *University of Notre Dame*. Web. 12 October 2012.
- Nir, David. "A Critical Examination of the Jewish Environmental Law of Bal Taschit "Do Not Destroy"". *Georgetown International Environmental Law Review* 18.2 (2006): 335. *Proquest*. Web. 23 October 2012.
- Pfefferkorn, Eli. "Elie Wiesel: The Inward Eyewitness in "The Testament"". *Modern Language Studies* 14.1 (1984): 3-10. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 October 2012.
- Roth John K. "From Night to Twilight: A Philosopher's Reading of Elie Wiesel". *Religion & Literature* 24.1 (1992): 59 - 73. *University of Notre Dame*. Web. 2 February 2013.
- Sodi, Risa. Risa Sodi. "La terza via: Dante and Primo Levi." *MLN* 127.1 (2012):199-203. *Project MUSE*. Web. 1 Mar. 2013.
- Schwartz, Eilon. Schwartz, Eilon. "Bal Taschit: A Jewish environmental precept." *Environmental Ethics* 19.4 (1997): 355. *Environmental Philosophy*. Web. 2 February 2013.
- ."Judaism and Nature: Theological and Moral Issues to Consider While Renegotiating a Jewish Relationship to the Natural World." *Judaism*. 44.4 (1995): 437. *American Jewish Congress*. Web. 22 October 2012.
- Thompson, Ian. *Primo Levi: A Life*. New York : Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt, 2003. Print.
- Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. Austin: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1999. Print.

